

ARCATA PLAZA
Bounded by G, H, Eighth & Ninth Streets
Arcata
Humboldt County
California

HALS CA-30
CA-30

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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ARCATA PLAZA

HALS NO. CA-30

Location: Block bounded by G and H Streets between 8th and 9th Streets, Arcata, Humboldt County, CA
Lat: 40.52104 Long: -124.05157

Significance: Arcata plaza has been continuously functioning as the center of this section of the town of Arcata since it was originally laid out in 1850. Its traditional layout reflects the design style of the time. It is associated with the founders of Arcata and played a key role in the development of the community and surrounding area by supporting mining operations.

Description: While many of the features of Arcata Plaza have been altered it retains sufficient integrity to qualify as a historic site.

Historic Features That Remain Include The Following:

The plaza occupies one full city block and is surrounded by commercial and retail businesses housed in buildings of two and three stories. These businesses include small specialty shops; not chain stores. Diagonal parking surrounds the plaza on all four sides. The plaza continues to function as the hub of a thriving retail district.

The plaza retains most of its original formal layout – walks enter the center of the plaza from each corner. There are also mid block walks on each street leading to the center of the plaza. There is a historic fountain dated 1912 at the mid block entrance on H Street. At the center of the plaza there is a circular paved plaza with a full size bronze statue of President William McKinley mounted on a pedestal at the center. Much of the plaza is planted in lawn. There are two remaining Canary Island Date Palms that match a pair visible in historic photos.

The plaza has undergone several renovations. Non-historic changes include:

The circular walk that had been added by 1914 has been removed. Raised concrete planters have been added at the corner entry points and surrounding the central plaza. A raised planter now surrounds the bronze sculpture and a portion of the base has been buried. The paving for the corner and midblock walks has been replaced at the same locations with exposed aggregate paving with wood joints, and on some concrete pads with benches have been appended to the walk. New period style light posts and period style benches and other site furniture have been added.

History: Arcata Plaza was laid out by the Union Company in 1850 along with the surrounding blocks of commercial buildings. The plaza was known as the

Commons. Arcata was known as Union or Uniontown for the first ten years of its existence. The Plaza became a parade ground where a citizen's military company drilled. The plaza was also used for grazing cows by citizens until May 6, 1901 when cows were banned from the Plaza. By city ordinance the Plaza was the only place in town where bars and liquor stores could be located and accordingly women were not allowed in the Plaza until 1870. The Plaza was the staging area for numerous pack trains of mules for miners. The Plaza and surrounding area was the site of corrals and livery stables.

Through the years, the Plaza served as the nucleus of community events. It was used as a ball park, a gathering place for town and national celebrations of holidays, the scene of huge 4th of July bonfires, of bicycle races, parades, Easter egg hunts, concerts, theatrical performances, fairs and an annual salmon bake.

By 1855 a railroad brought supplies to the southwest corner of the plaza from a deep water wharf that had been constructed on the shore. Supplies were brought to the plaza to construct the businesses located around the plaza and to support mining camps in the vicinity. A 1897 photograph shows the plaza with a similar configuration – mostly lawn, the diagonal paths, and wood plank sidewalk on all four sides.

In 1895 Arcata resident Charles Murdock thought the plaza should be improved. He wrote, "The Plaza should be a thing of beauty and a center of life and interest. No building should rest upon it, but green sword, and well kept walks, a fountain, shrubs, and trees should be so attractive that it would be the pride of every citizen." This led to the establishment of the Plaza Improvement Committee. A center bandstand was completed in 1901 and later removed in 1906 when the McKinley statue was installed. By 1903 roses, boxwood and the original palms were planted. Murdock suggested the radiating sidewalks which were completed in 1910. The WCTU drinking fountain, built by stonemason James Davidson, was installed in 1912.

Haig Patigian is the sculpture commissioned by George Zehnder to create the McKinley statue. This was Patigian's first major commission. Patigian was a prolific sculpture whose works includes a stature of Abraham Lincoln in front of San Francisco's City Hall, a monument to the Volunteer Firemen of the 1850s in Washington Square, San Francisco, General John Pershing in Golden Gate Park, and in Washington D.C. a statue of Thomas Starr King in the Hall of Fame at the Capitol and a bust of Herbert Hoover in the White House. Delivery of the McKinley statue to Arcata was delayed because of the 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco. Workman removed the completed statue from the burning foundry – saving it.

Most of the buildings that surround the plaza were constructed before 1900, three were built in the 1950s, one is quite new, and the remainder were built by 1915. The Jacoby Building at 8th & H Streets built in 1857 is California Registered

Historical Landmark No. 783. The Hotel Arcata at 9th & G was built in 1915 by W.H. Weeks of San Francisco.

Sources: Historic photographs and captions from a display inside the Hotel Arcata, 9th & G Streets, 708 9th Street, Arcata, CA 95521 (800) 344-1221 or (707) 826-0217.
Photos taken by A.W. Ericson.

City of Arcata website, www.cityofarcata.com

Historical Sites Society, Arcata History, www.arcatahistory.org/arcata_plaza.htm

Arcata History Timeline, www.google.com/search: Arcata plaza history

Arcata Eye Newspaper, www.viamagazine.com/weekenders/arcata00.asp

“Leave McKinley and the Plaza as they are” by Monica Hadley, Uprooting the McKinley sculpture means tearing up Arcata’s history.
www.arcataeye.com/old/opinion/000404opinion01.shtml

Site visit in May 2009.

Historian: Chris Pattillo, Landscape Architect, July 7, 2009
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H Street mid-block walk with the 1912 drinking fountain (Chris Pattillo, May 2009).



Current photo of the plaza showing one of the diagonal walks, the central plaza area, the McKinley statue and pedestal, lawn, and two date palms (Chris Pattillo, May 2009).